Classroom dialogic discourse: An observational study

Luisa Molinari*, Consuelo Mameli

*Dipartimento di Psicologia, Borgo Carissimi 10, 43100 Parma, Italy

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Abstract

The aim of our study is to investigate the classroom discourse interactive sequences generated by the teachers’ questions. For this purpose, we collected observational data in three Italian primary school classes through the videorecordings of several activities. Analyses were carried out on all questions that teachers directed to their pupils, and on the successive sequence of interaction (answers by pupils and uptake by teachers). The results show that classroom practices are dominated by patterns of discourse which are more concerned with the teacher telling and controlling the interaction than with the construction of collective and real dialogic discourse.

Keywords: Classroom dialogic discourse; Italy; observational study; interaction.

1. Introduction

Drawing on recent developments in dialogic approaches to learning and teaching, this contribution examines classroom practices in order to detach the roots of dialogic meaning-making discourse.

At first sight, classrooms are full of discourse and dialogue, observable in the frequent back and forth between students and teachers, or in the everyday exchanges during formal and informal talk. But, as O’Connor and Michaels (2007) argue, this common observation does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that all these activities can be conceptualized as effective dialogic talk, or ‘dialogic stance’ supporting learning and teaching. In fact, as Bakhtin (1981) has widely discussed, a distinction shall be made between dialogic and monologic discourse. A monologic teacher is largely concerned with the transmission of knowledge and in doing so s/he keeps firmly the control over the class. Dialogic talk, in contrast, is oriented towards promoting communication through authentic exchange, during which the teacher genuinely makes efforts in order to help pupils share and build meanings.

The importance of such topic is nowadays clear to many scholars and researchers, whose studies have clearly highlighted one of the major problems contrasting the construction of effective dialogic teaching practices (Sue, 2008), that is, the dominance in classrooms of the teacher’s voice at the expense of the pupils’ own meaning-making.

* Luisa Molinari. Tel.: +39-0521-034821; fax: +39-0521-034812
E-mail address: luisa.molinari@unipr.it

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voices. As several authors have widely discussed (Burns and Myhill, 2004; Fisher and Larkin, 2008), this constitute one of the main barriers to the implementation of dialogic teaching and can therefore be considered as a “block” to genuine dialogue in classroom settings.

Conducted especially in the UK and USA, these studies have repeatedly shown that teachers have a strong tendency to dominate classroom talk scenarios (Myhill, 2006). Based on such evidence is what Alexander (2004) states: ‘direct instruction through whole class teaching is the commonest teaching approach world-wide’ (p. 17).

Given these premises, how can teachers enhance their role in shaping and developing learning? Based on Vygotsky’s beliefs about the complex interplay of thought and language in shaping meaning, Mercer (2000) suggests that teachers shall reduce their role as orchestrator and controller of classroom talk, and instead repositioning themselves as enabler of talk for thinking.

Our study is intended to contribute to this important debate, and focuses on classroom talk in Italian primary schools. More in particular, the aim of our study is to investigate the classroom discourse interactive sequences generated by the teachers’ questions.

2. Method

Research investigating the dynamics of classroom discourse requires fine-grained data, referring to the nature and type of classroom discourse (the specific interactions between pupils and teachers). For this purpose, we collected observational data in three Italian primary school classes through the videorecordings of several activities.

The pupils were in their first year in school, and their ages varied from 6.2 to 6.8. Two teachers were employed in each class.

After a period during which teachers and pupils became confident with the video equipment, we collected data comprising: a) recording of whole class episodes (one for each observed teacher: total 6 episodes); b) recording of small group activity (one for each teacher, total 6 group activity).

In total, our material comprises 587 minutes of recordings (almost ten hours).

Analyses were carried out in order to detach the kind of questions teachers directed to their pupils, and the form of the successive sequence of interaction (answers by pupils and uptake by teachers).

3. Results

The video data were viewed, transcribed, and analysed. For the purpose of the analysis, questions were defined as those utterances which invited the pupils to make a spoken response.

The categories for the coding of the questions were derived through an interactive process, in which the two authors worked first independently and then met to compare the categories. Reliability was measured and was over .85 for each category.

Teachers’ questions were coded in three categories, which are partly similar to those identified by Nystrand et al. (2003) and Myhill (2006). They were: authentic questions, close questions and evaluation questions.

**Authentic questions** are those for which the asker has not prespecified an answer; as such, they allow a range of responses, often opinions, hypotheses, imaginings, ideas. We further divided this category into three subcategories: those referring to **school** topics (for example: What do you see in this picture?), those referring to the **organization** of the activity (for example: Why do you think it is interesting to work in pairs?), those referring to **extra-school** topics (For example: What did you do in the weekend?).

**Close questions** invite an answer that the teacher has predetermined. They comprise two subcategories: **factual**, asking for information about the topic (For example: How do you spell ‘home’?), and **cued**, giving clues to answer (for example: What is the first letter of the word ‘home’).

**Evaluation questions** comprise three subcategories: **clarification** (for example: I don’t understand what you mean, can you say it again?), **management** of behaviour or task (for example: Be careful, what did I say a minute ago?), making **connections** (for example: Who remembers what we did yesterday?).

The interactive sequence generated by the teachers’ questions comprised two lags: a) the **pupils’ answer**, coded on the basis of their length (short when it is made of four words or less, long when it is at least five words); the **teachers’ uptake** of such answers, coded as **positive** evaluation, **sharing** the answer with the whole class (for
example, repeating the answer more loudly to the class while adding information or clarify some points), and not acceptance, expressed through a simple refusal (No, that’s not correct) or by ignoring.

The results are presented in Table 1. Consider that each question may elicit more than one answer (for example, when two or more pupils respond to the same question) and that teachers’ uptake are not exhibited after any answer.

Table 1. Teachers’ questions, Pupils’ answers, and Teachers’ Uptakes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions’ categories</th>
<th>Teachers’ questions N N/min.</th>
<th>Pupils’ answers Short</th>
<th>Long</th>
<th>Positive evaluation</th>
<th>Teachers’ uptake Sharing</th>
<th>Not acceptance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authentic questions</td>
<td>School</td>
<td>48 0.17</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organisation</td>
<td>23 0.08</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extra-school</td>
<td>18 0.06</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close questions</td>
<td>Factual</td>
<td>227 0.08</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cued</td>
<td>78 0.27</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation questions</td>
<td>Clarification</td>
<td>48 0.17</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>445 1.56</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Connections</td>
<td>38 0.13</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the three main categories, evaluation questions are the most frequent. Within this category, however, a high proportion (almost 84%) is comprised in the subcategory of class management. This result may be interpreted on the basis of the pupils’ age: being in their first year of school, these children need to be highly monitored during activities and school tasks. It is surprising, however, to notice that only a very small number of questions are directed towards asking for clarification and especially making connections. This last type of questions is particularly important in school life, since it can facilitate and support learning. As Myhill and Brackley (2004) state, a primary responsibility of teachers is to enable connections between what children already know and the new contents or experiences, and this is particularly important especially in the first years of school, when a learning conversation needs to begin with ‘enough prior shared knowledge to be able to achieve some initial joint understanding’ (Mercer, 2000, p. 21).

A high number of question is also of a close type, guided by the teachers’ predetermined objective or answer. They are mainly directed to verify the acquisition of facts or to recall information.

Only a limited number of authentic questions were detached in the video material, and they were mainly related to school topics.

As for the interactive sequence generated by these questions, first of all we can note that almost all close questions are followed by a short answer, while a long answer is more often subsequent to authentic questions, centred on both school and extraschool topics. These questions are therefore very important for the development of ‘dialogic stances’ among teachers and pupils, since they ‘open’ the possibility for these very young children to express opinions, imaginings and reflections on the topics. The same is partly true for those questions that ask children to clarify their previous utterances (clarification), thus helping to deepen their thoughts and ideas.

Finally, a few words shall be dedicated to the third part of the sequence, concerning teachers’ uptake of the pupils’ answers. Only a limited number of answers are not accepted or refused by the teachers, while almost half of them are followed by a positive evaluation, which is often expressed with one or two words (‘Good’, ‘Interesting’) and is therefore an ‘easy’ way to certify the response. Sharing, on the contrary, is only seldom used. This is a critical point because, as Nystrand et al. (2003) explain, this kind of uptake can be considered as a high-level of evaluation, launching ‘the students’ answers into the fabric of an unfolding exchange’ (p.146) affecting the course of discussion.

4. Conclusion

In summary, our data confirm that teaching in primary schools is very much a matter of teachers’ talking and directing children’s talk. In line with the most recent studies on learning and teaching (Fisher and Larkin, 2008; O’Connor and Michaels, 2007), our study gives evidence to the presence of a type of monologic discourse in class. The relative proportions of questions used by teachers show that classroom practices are dominated by patterns of discourse which are more concerned with the teacher telling and controlling the interaction, using questions with pre-specified answer or evaluation questions, than with acknowledging or utilising children’s experiential or cognitive prior knowledge elicited by connections or authentic questions.
However, our data seem to support the idea that authentic questions are actually the ones that elicit longer answers from the pupils, which are eventually used by teachers for the construction of collective and real dialogic discourse. The key question, then, is to deeply understand how can these results be useful for teachers, who are called to promote children’s learning in different class situations, focusing on their thinking and exploring through a real dialogue with teachers.

This study has several limits, such as the small number of observed classes and therefore the difficulties in the generalization of results. However, a careful qualitative observation of several interactive sequences of discourse between teachers and children highlighted that teachers can display some ‘good practices’ that we consider as important implications of the study. Through these practices, such as posing authentic questions and waiting for the pupils’ answers to be long and exhaustive, classroom discourse can switch from monologic to a real dialogic one.

References